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THE JOURNAL OF RELIGION

Volume I

SEPTEMBER 1921

Number 5

PSYCHOLOGY AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Twenty years ago in *A Dynamic Faith*, after reviewing the new questions which the great sciences had raised for religion, I said: "There are still harder problems than any of these. Psychology has opened a series of questions which make the boldest tremble for his faith in an endless life or in any spiritual reality." The twenty years that have intervened have made my point much more clear. It is now pretty generally recognized that the deepest issues of the faith are to be settled in this field. The problem of the real nature of the human soul is at the present moment probably the most important religious question before us, for upon the answer to it all our vital spiritual interests depend. If man has no unique interior domain, if he is only a tiny bit of that vast system of naturalism in which every curve of process and development is rigidly determined by antecedent causes, then "spiritual" is only a high-sounding word with a metaphorical significance, but with no basis of reality in the nature of things. There is certainly no "place" in the external world of space where we can expect to find spiritual realities. They are not to be found by going "somewhere." Olympus has been climbed, and it was as naturalistic as any other mountain peak. Eden is only a defined area of Mesopotamia, and that blessed word can work no miracles for us now. The dome of the sky is only an

optical illusion. It is no supersensuous realm on which we can build our hopes. The beyond as a spiritual reality is within, or it is nowhere. Psychology, however, has not been very encouraging in promises of hope. It has gone the way of the other sciences and has taken an ever increasing slant toward naturalism. The result is that most so-called "psychologies of religion" reduce religion either to a naturalistic or to a subjective basis, which means in either case that religion as a way to some objective spiritual reality has eluded us and has disappeared as a constructive power. Many a modern psychologist can say with Browning's Cleon:

And I have written three books on the soul,
Proving absurd all written hitherto
And putting us to ignorance again.

Two of the main tendencies in what is usually called scientific psychology are (1) the "behaviorist" tendency and (2) the tendency to reduce the inner life to a series of "mind states." Let us consider behaviorism first. This turns psychology into "a purely objective experimental branch of natural science."¹ It aims at "the prediction and control of behavior." "Introspection forms no essential part of its method." One is not concerned with "interpretation in terms of consciousness," one is interested only in reactions, responses—in short, in *behavior* in the presence of stimuli which produce movements. The body is a complicated organ and "mind" is merely a convenient term to express its "activities."² The behaviorist "recognizes no dividing line between man and brute." Psychology becomes "the science of behavior,"³ the study of "the activity of man or animal as it can be observed from the outside, either with or without

¹ Watson, *Behavior*, p. 1.

² See Ralph Barton Perry's article "A Behavioristic View of Purpose" in the *Journal of Philosophy*, February 17, 1921.

³ Pillsbury, *Fundamentals of Psychology*, p. 4.

attempting to determine the mental states by inference from these acts." Emotions become reduced forthwith to "the bodily resonance" set up in the muscular and visceral systems by instinctive movements in the presence of objects, these curious movements being due entirely to the inheritance of physiological structure adapted at least in the early stages to aid survival. There is no way by which behaviorist psychology can give any standing to religion or to any type of spiritual values. "Aesthetics is the study of the useless," as William James baldly states the case. Conscience disappears or becomes another name for the inheritance or acquisition of certain types of social behavior. Everything which we call ethics or morality changes into well-defined and rigidly determined behavior. There is nothing more "spiritual" about it than there is in the fall of a raindrop or in the luminous trail of a meteor, or in any form of what has happily been called "cosmic weather."

This reduction of personality to a center of activity is a reaction from the dualistic sundering of mind and body inherited from Descartes. The theory of psychophysical parallelism is utterly bankrupt. Idealism, which is an attempt to get round the *impasse* of dualism by treating mind as the only reality, is abhorrent to scientists and unpopular with young philosophers especially in America. Some other solution is therefore urgent. The easiest one at hand, though it is obviously temporary and superficial, is to cut across the mind loop, ignore its unique, originative, creative capacity and its interior depth, to deal only with body plus body's activities, and to call that "psychology."

The "mind-state" psychology takes us little farther on. It also is a form of naturalism. "Mind-state" psychology makes more of introspection than behaviorist psychology does, and it works more than the latter does in terms of consciousness, which for the behaviorist can be almost ignored or questioned as an existing reality. According to this view,

mind or consciousness is composed of a vast number of "elemental units," and the business of psychology is to analyze and describe these units or states and to discover the laws of their arrangement or succession. Mind, on this theory, is an aggregate or sum total of "states." Professor James, who gives great place to "mind states," will, however, not admit that they are permanent and repeatable "units," passing and returning unaltered. In his usual vivid way he says that "a permanently existing 'idea' [i.e., mental unit] which makes its appearance before the footlights of consciousness at periodical intervals is as mythological an entity as the Jack of Spades."¹ And yet he continues to deal with mind as a vast series of more or less describable states. Some states are "substantive," such as our "perceptions," our "memories," or our definite "images," when the mind perches and rests upon some clear and describable thought, and on the other hand there are "transitive states" which are vague, hard to catch or hold or express, and which reveal the mind in flight, in passage, on the way from one substantive state to another.

When we ask the "mind-state" psychologist to tell us about the soul or to supply us with a working substitute for it, he relegates it to the scrap heap where lie the collected rubbish and the antiquated mental furniture of the medieval centuries. We have no need of it. It is only a *word* anyhow. It has always been an expensive luxury and a continual bother. We are better off with it gone. When we look about for a "self as knower," or for a guardian of our identity, we find all that we need in these same "passing states of consciousness." They not only know things and facts, but they also know themselves, and successively inherit and adapt all the preceding "states" have gained and acquired. The state of the present moment owns the thoughts and experiences which preceded it, for "what possesses the possessor possesses the possessed." "In our waking hours," Professor James says, "though each

¹ *Psychology* (Briefer Course), p. 197.

pulse of consciousness dies away and is replaced by another, yet that other, among the things it knows, knows its own predecessor and finding it ‘warm,’ greets it saying, ‘Thou art *mine* and part of the same self with me.’” It seems, then, this famous writer concludes, that “states of consciousness are all that psychology needs to do her work with. Metaphysics or theology may prove the soul to exist; but for psychology the hypothesis of such a substantial principle of unity is superfluous.”¹ We are certainly hard up if we must depend on proofs which theology can give us!

We are thus once more reduced to a condition of sheer naturalism. Our stream of consciousness is only a rapid succession of passing states, each “state” causally attached to a molecular process in the brain. “Every *psychosis* is the result of a *neurosis*.” There is no soul, there is no creative spiritual pilot of the stream, there is no freedom, there are no moral values, there is nothing but passing “cosmic weather,” sometimes peeps of sunshine, sometimes moonshine, sometimes drizzle or blizzard, and sometimes cyclone or waterspout! To meet the appalling thinness of this “cinema” of mind states, we are given the comfort of believing that there is an under-threshold world within, possibly more real and surely more important than this little rivulet of states which make up our conscious life. There is a “fringe” to consciousness more wonderful than that which adorned the robe of the high priest. This “fringe” defies description and baffles all analysis. It is a halo or penumbra which surrounds every “state” and holds all the states vitally together, so that “states” turn out to be unsundered in some deeper mysterious currents of being. Others would call this same underlying, mysterious part of us the subliminal “self,” i.e., under-threshold “self.” It is a kind of semispiritual matrix where the states of consciousness are formed and gestated. It is the source to which we may trace everything that cannot be

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

explained by the avenues of the senses. Demons and divinities knock at its doors and visitants from superterrestrial shores peep in at its windows. It is often treated, especially of course by Frederic Myers, as a deeper "self," more or less discontinuous with our conscious upper self, the self of mind states. All work of genius is due to "subliminal uprushes," "an emergence into the current of ideas which the man is consciously manipulating of other ideas which he has not consciously originated, but which have shaped themselves beyond his will in profounder regions of his being." As is well known, Professor James resorts to these "subliminal uprushes" for his explanation of all the deeper religious experiences and he has done much to give credit to these "profounder regions of our being" and to make the subliminal theory popular. He does not, however, as Myers does, treat it as another "self," an intermediary between earth and heaven, a messenger and a mediator of all those higher and diviner aspects of life which transcend the sphere of sense and of the empirical world.

No theory certainly is sound which begins by cutting the subconscious and the conscious life apart into two more or less dissociated selves. There is every indication and evidence of continuity and correlation between what is above and what is below the threshold which in any case is as relative and artificial a line as is the horizon. The so-called "uprushes" of the genius are finely correlated with his normal experience into which they "uprush." The "uprushes" which convey truth to Socrates beautifully fit, first, the character of the man and, secondly, the demands of the temporal environment. Dante's "uprushes" correspond to the psychological climate of the medieval world, and Shakespeare's "uprushes" are well suited to the later period of the Renaissance. All subliminal communications are congruent and consonant with the experience of the person who receives them. The visions of apocalyptic seers are all couched in the imagery

of the apocalyptic schools, and so, too, the reports of mediums are all in terms of spiritualistic beliefs. We shall never find the solution of our religious problems by dividing the inner life of man into two unrelated selves, by whatever name we call them, for any religion that is to be real must go all the way through us, must unify all our powers, and must furnish a spring and power by which we live here and now in the sphere of our consciousness, our character, and our will.

It proves to be just as impossible to cut consciousness up into the fragmentary bits or units called mind states, or to sunder it into a so-called "self as knower" and "self as known." Consciousness is never a shower of shot—a series of discontinuous units. It is the most completely integral unity known to us anywhere in the universe. There are no "parts" to it; it is without breaks or gaps. It is one undivided whole. The only unit we can properly talk about is our unique persisting personal self in conscious relation to an environment. We can, of course, treat consciousness in the abstract as an aggregate of states and we can formulate a scientific account of this constructed entity as we can of any other abstracted section of reality. But this abstracted entity is forever totally different from the warm and intimate inner life within us, as we actually live it and feel its flow. Any state or process which we may talk about is only an artificial fragment of a larger, deeper reality which gives the "fragment" its peculiar being and makes it what it is. Underneath all that appears and happens in the conscious flow is the personal self for whom the appearances occur. Any psychologist who explicitly leaves this out of his account always implicitly smuggles it in again.

The most striking fact of experience is *knowing that we know*. The same consciousness which knows any given object in the same pulse of consciousness knows itself as knowing it. Self-consciousness is present in all consciousness of objects. The thinker that thinks is involved in and is bound up with all knowledge, even of the simplest sort. Every idea, every

feeling, and every act of will is what it is because it is in living unity with our entire personal self. If any such "state" got dissociated, slipped away and undertook to do business on its own hook, it would be as unknown to us as our guardian angel is. The mind that knows can never be separated from the world that is known. One can think in abstraction of a mind apart by itself and of a world equally isolated—but no such mind and no such world actually exist. To be a real mind, a real self, is to be in active commerce with a real world given in experience. One thinks his object in the same unified pulse of consciousness in which he thinks himself and vice versa. There is no self-consciousness without object-consciousness, and there is no object-consciousness without self-consciousness. Outer and inner, knower and known, and not two but forever one. The "soul," therefore, is not something hidden away in behind or above and beyond our ideas and feelings and will activities. It is the active living unity of personal consciousness—the one psychic integer and unit for a true psychology. It binds all the items of experience into one indivisible unity, one organic whole through which our personal type of life is made possible. At every moment of waking, intelligent life we look out upon each fact, each event, each experience from a wider self which organizes the new fact in with its former experiences, weaves it into the web of its memories and emotions and purposes, makes the new fact a part of itself, and yet at the same time knows itself as transcending and outliving the momentary fact.

When we study the personal self deeply enough, not as cut up into artificial units, but as the living, undivided whole, which is implied in all coherent experience, we find at once a basis for those ideal values that are rightly called spiritual and for "those mighty hopes that make us men." The first step toward a genuine basis of spiritual life is to be found in the restoration of the personal self to its true place as the ultimate fact, or datum, of self-conscious experience. As soon

as we come back to this central reality, our unified, unique, self-active personality, we find ourselves in possession of material enough; as Browning would say,

. . . . For fifty hopes and fears,
As old and new at once as nature's self,
To rap and knock and enter in our soul
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,
Round the ancient idol, on his base again,—
The grand Perhaps!

What we find at once, even without a resort to a subliminal self, or to "uprushes," is that our normal, personal self-consciousness is a unique, living, self-active, creative center of energies, dealing not only with space and time and tangible things, but dealing as well with realities which are space and which are space- and time-transcending. "The things that are not" prove to be immense factors in our lives and constantly "bring to naught the things that are." The greatest events of history have not been due to physical forces; they have been due to plans and ideals which were real only in the viewless minds of men. What *was not yet* brought about what was to be. Alexander the Great with his physical forces, sweeping across the ancient world like a cataclysm of nature, was certainly no more truly a world-builder than was Jesus, who had no armies, who used no tangible forces, but merely put into operation those "things that were not," i.e., his ideas of what ought to be and his conviction that love is stronger than Roman legions. The simplest and humblest of us, like the Psalmist, find the Meshech where we sojourn too straightened and narrow for us. We have all cried, "Woe is me that I sojourn in Meshech!" The reason that we discover the limits and bounds of our poor Meshech is that we are all the time going beyond the hampering Meshech that tries to contain and imprison us.

The thing which spoils all our finite camping places is our unstilled consciousness that we are made for something more

than we have yet realized or attained. Our ideals are an unmistakable intimation of our time-transcending nature. We can no more stop with *that which is* than Niagara can stop at the fringe of the fall. All consciousness of the higher rational type is continually carried forward toward the larger whole that would complete and fulfil its present experience. We are aware of the limit only because we are already beyond it. The present is a pledge of more; the little arc which we have gives us a ground of faith in the full circle which we seek. A study of man's life which does not deal with this inherent idealizing tendency is like *Hamlet* with Hamlet left out. Martineau declared:

Amid all the sickly talk about "ideals" which has become the commonplace of our age, it is well to remember that so long as they are dreams of future possibility and not faiths in present realities, so long as they are a mere self-painting of the yearning spirit and not its personal surrender to immediate communion with an infinite Perfection, they have no more solidity or steadiness than floating air-bubbles, gay in the sunshine and broken by the passing wind. . . . The very gate of entrance to religion, the moment of its new birth, is the discovery that your ideal is the everlasting Real, no transient brush of a fancied angel wing, but the abiding presence and persuasion of the Soul of souls.¹

In the same vein Pringle-Pattison, one of the wisest of our living teachers, has said:

Consciousness of imperfection, the capacity for progress, and the pursuit of perfection, are alike possible to man only through the universal life of thought and goodness in which he shares and which, at once an indwelling presence and an unattainable ideal, draws him "on and always on."²

It is here in these experiences of ours which spring out of our real nature, but which always carry us beyond *what is* and which make it impossible for us to *live* in a world composed of "things," no matter how golden they are, that we have the source of our spiritual values. When we talk about values

¹ Martineau, *A Study of Religion* (2d ed.), I, 12.

² *The Philos, Radicals, and Other Essays*, pp. 97-98.

we may use the word in two senses. In the ordinary sense we mean something extrinsic, utilitarian. We mean that we possess something which can be exchanged for something else. It is precious because we can sell it or swap it or use it to keep life going. In the other sense we see value in reference to something which *ought to be*, whether it now is or not. It is *fit* to be, it would justify its being in relation to the whole reality. When we speak of ethical or spiritual values we are thinking of something that will minister to the highest good of persons or of a society of persons. Value in this loftier meaning always has to do with ideals. A being without any conscious end or goal, i.e., without an ideal, would have no sense of worth, no spiritual values. It does not appear on the level of instinct. It arises as an appreciation of what ought to be realized in order to complete and fulfil any life which is to be called good. Obviously a person with rich and complex interests will have many scales of value, but lower and lesser ones will fall into place under wider and higher ones, so that one forms a kind of hierarchical system of values with some overtopping end of supreme worth dominating the will.

It becomes one of the deepest questions in the world what connection there is between man's spiritual values or ideals and the eternal nature of things in the universe. Are these ideals of ours, these values which seem to raise us from the naturalistic to the spiritual level, just our subjective creations, or are they expressions of a co-operating and rational power beyond us and yet in us giving us intimations of what is true and best in a world more real than that of matter and motion? These ideal values, such as our appreciation of beauty, our confidence in truth, our dedication to moral causes, our love for worthy persons, our loyalty to the Kingdom of God, are not born of selfish preference or individual desire. They are not capricious like dreams and visions. They attach to something deeper than our personal wishes, in fact our faith in them and our devotion to them often cause us to take lines of action straight

against our personal wishes and our individual desires. They stand the test of stress and strain, they weather the storms of time which submerge most things, they survive all shock and mutations and only increase in worth with the wastage of secondary goods. They rest on no mere temporary impulse or sporadic whim. They have their roots deep in the life of the race. They have lasted better than Andes or Ararat, and they are based upon common, universal aspects of rational life. They are at least as sure and prophetic as are laws of triangles and relations of space. If we can count on the permanence of the multiplication table and on the continuity of nature, no less can we count on the conversation of values and the continued significance of life.

They seem thus to belong to the system of the universe and to have the guardianship of some invisible Pilot of the cosmic ship. The streams of moral power and the spiritual energies that have their rise in good persons are as much to be respected facts of the universe as are the rivers that carry ships of commerce. Moral goodness is a factor in the constitution of the world, and the eternal nature of the universe backs it as surely as it backs the laws of hydrogen. It does not back every ideal, for some ideals are unfit and do not minister to a coherent and rationally ordered scheme of life. Those ideals only have the august sanction and right of way which are born out of the age-long spiritual travail of the race and which tend to organize men for better team efforts, i.e., which promote the social community life, the organism of the Spirit. Through these spiritual forces, revealed in normal ethical persons, we are, I believe, nearer to the life of God and closer to the revealing centers of the universe than we are when we turn to the subliminal selves of hysterics. The normal interior life of man is boundless and bottomless. It is not a physical reality, to be measured by foot rules or yardsticks. It is a reality of a wholly different order. It is essentially spiritual, i.e., of spirit. In its organized and differentiated life

this personal self of ours is often weak and erratic. We feel the *urge* which belongs to the very nature of *spirit*, but we blunder in our direction, we bungle our aims and purposes, we fail to discover what it is that we really want. But we are never insulated from the wider spiritual environment which constitutes the true inner world from which we have come and to which we belong. There are many ways of correspondence with this environment. No way, however, is more vital, more life-giving than this way of dedication to the advancement of the moral ideals of the world.